WHAT RELIGION IS NOT
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Psalm 19:1–10
John 2:13–22

"Making a whip of chords, he drove all of them out of the temple. . . .
He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables."
John 2:15 (NRSV)

Abraham Lincoln had it right. Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God
by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all our national policies and practices—
saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and
worry earnestly whether we are on God's side. . . . God's politics is never partisan or ideological. But it challenges everything about our politics.
God's politics reminds us of
the people our politics always neglects—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind.
God's politics challenges narrow, ethnic, economic, or cultural self-interest, reminding us of a much wider world and the creative diversity of all those made in the image of the creator.

Jim Wallis
God's Politics:
Why the Right Gets It Wrong
And the Left Doesn't Get It

Dear God, as Jesus came to the temple long ago, so come into our lives. As he overturned the tables of the money changers, so overturn what needs to be different in our lives. Startle us with his immediacy, his urgency, and give us integrity to hear your word and to answer with our courage and faith. Amen.

I was struck by something Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall said recently. Hall said that when he is introduced or in any way identified publicly as a Christian theologian these days, he immediately has to explain

what he is not. I know what he means. The Christianity that most makes the news these days makes me cringe. It is not what I mean either.

And so a sermon on what religion is not. Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, addresses the subject at the beginning of her fine book *Called to Question*. She reflects on how religion—hers or anybody's—seems to restrict and confine the human spirit. She writes, "I believe so much in the breadth of the soul that every day I respect less and less those things in religion . . . that bind it. We tie the soul down. . . . We snuff it mid-flight. It is God that religion must be about, not itself. When religion makes itself God, it ceases to be religion. . . . God save us from the smallness we practice in the name of religion."

That's quite a statement. For nearly five centuries, Catholics and Protestants have been squaring off and defining themselves by what they are not. It used to be a serious infraction for a Catholic to walk through the doors of a Protestant church or for a Protestant to enter a Catholic church. At times we went to war with one another. At times we seemed to say that the other side was not even legitimately Christian. At times we seemed to believe that there will be only Catholics—or Protestants—in heaven. Our religion separated us.

I thought about all that and about how stunned my own family members would be as I drove over to Old St. Pat's three weeks ago in the middle of a snowstorm to preach the sermon at 5:00 Mass. That was a first for me. It was a very moving experience. Father Jack Wall and Father Tom Hurley are good friends. Their approach to ministry and mission are similar to our own. The church was full; the service was lively. I kept thinking about my Grandmother McCormick, a product of that older age and mentality, who was convinced that the Catholic church wanted to take over the world and start persecuting Protestants, and I imagine her wringing her hands in heaven, her Presbyterian grandson preaching in a mass, lamenting that Rome had finally got me. It was a good experience, a symbol, I thought, of the way Christianity ultimately judges and overcomes its own religious expressions and institutions. For an hour, we were not Catholics or Protestants, but Christians trying to follow and be faithful to Jesus, our common Lord.

A few days later, I received a wonderful e-mail from a young woman, Carla Nuzzo, who was in attendance at the Mass with her two sons, ages twelve and nine. She said nice things about my sermon. She explained that Mass is still an exercise in trying to sit still for her sons but that occasionally a word or two seeps in.

She wrote,

> In the car after Mass my older son asked why a non-Catholic would speak at Old St. Pat's. I went into some PC speak about how Lent unites all Christians, about how religious differences of any kind have always caused a heap of trouble, about how Old St. Pat's is about inclusion and so on . . . when from the backseat the nine-year-old said, "Who cares? So he's not Catholic. Why are we even talking about it?"

"I was momentarily humbled by this," she wrote. "He seemed so blind to differences that even bringing them up seemed offensive. I would have taken great pride and credit for raising such a naturally inclusive child if he hadn't added, 'It's too bad he's a Cubs fan, though. That's just dumb.'"

Father Hurley had mentioned my baseball commitments in his introduction, and I had forgotten, frankly, that Old St. Pat's is on the South Side, barely. He said my religious affiliation wasn't a problem; it was my baseball preferences.

Sometimes someone has to stand up and say, or demonstrate, what religion is not.

The text for the day, the third Sunday in Lent, is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. It is a strong story. It is not a particularly easy story. It is a story about what religion is not.

There is in the Bible a kind of running argument between God and religion. God creates. God gives life. God calls a people and delivers them from slavery. God provides for them. God gives them a home, and what God expects for all this undeserved goodness, this great love, is gratitude and life lived on the basis of that same love. God's people are to love God with all their heart and mind and strength, and they are to do that by loving their neighbor. It's that simple—or it ought to be. Religion enters the picture as the way people organize themselves to thank God and to live in faithful love. Rituals are designed to help them express their gratitude. Rules and laws are devised to make sure they're getting it right. And then a shift happens. The rituals and rules designed to help them express their gratitude and love slowly become the point of the exercise. Gratitude and love fade as keeping the rituals and obeying the rules ascends.

And so there is this wonderful running argument between God and the people, particularly the religious people. God keeps saying, "No, you're missing the point." In the Bible, God speaks through individuals called prophets who stand up and say things like—

> "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." That's Hosea.

Amos puts is bluntly:

> "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Micah:

> "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?" . . . .

How about thousands of rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? I'll do whatever it takes. I'll be utterly and passionately and fanatically religious if that's what you want.

Micah writes,

> > "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

And so Jesus, one day, out of that prophetic tradition in his own religious heritage, visits the Jerusalem temple, the heart of his religion, the very institutional, physical embodiment of his faith. What he saw that day must have been jarring. In the first courtyard, open to all, called the Court of the Gentiles, there were booths where every adult male had to pay the annual temple tax. But before he got that far he had to change his Roman coins for Hebrew money because the Roman coin bore the image of the emperor. So there was a currency exchange.

In the next court there were inspection tables where the visitor presented his sacrificial lamb or doves to ensure that they were without blemish. Beside those tables, there was a menagerie of sorts: preinspected lambs, oxen, calves, pigeons, for sale.

Fleming Rutledge describes it with tongue in cheek:

> It's Passover week, and it's a mob scene. The temple is a tourist attraction, religion at its apex. Here are all the religious instincts of humanity on display. There's liturgical dance in the sanctuary, performance art in the courtyard, and a rock mass in the nave. You can buy a tour guide in the narthex, a cookbook in the transept, and a bumper sticker in the parish hall. Weight Watchers meets in the Sunday School wing, yoga in the gym, AA in the audiovisual room. There's a prayer group in the basement, a flower show in the courtyard, and group therapy in the reception room. And you can get your money changed at

> five convenient ATM locations. What a temple! What a church! God must be very pleased. (*The Undoing of Death*, p. 53)

Sometimes someone has to stand up and say what religion is not. So Jesus does it. Fashions a whip. Upsets the currency exchange table, sends the coins flying everywhere, knocks down the inspection booths, opens the gates to the sacrificial animal pens, and physically ejects everybody. Can you imagine that? I'll bet his disciples told that story over and over again and laughed. "Remember the time he walked right into the temple and overturned the tables? Remember the noise, the looks on their faces?"

Sometimes someone has to stand up and say what religion is not.

In our day, Jim Wallis has done it eloquently in a best seller, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. Wallis is an Evangelical pastor, Editor of *Sojourners* magazine, who has the courage to identify what he calls the "hijacking" of Christianity by the religious and political right. It is a potent collaboration, in the news every day. "Many people around the world," he writes, "now think that Christian faith stands for political commitments that are almost the opposite of its true meaning." Wallis overturns a few tables. "God is not partisan. God is not a Republican or a Democrat. When either party tries to politicize God, or co-opt religious communities for their political agendas, they make a terrible mistake."

Author Dan Wakefield picked up Wallis's phrase for a new book of his own, *The Hijacking of Jesus,* in which he has researched the way the religious right has successfully claimed for itself the mantle of Christian faith and happily joined hands with the political right in support of a political and social agenda it simply announces as the Christian agenda. To express a different opinion on reproductive rights for instance, to come to a different conclusion, on global warming and the environment, for instance, or stem cell research, or Social Security, is to be accused of opposing Christian faith and values.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, Editor of *Tikkun* magazine, in a new book, *The Left Hand of God*, says that "the unholy alliance of the Political Right and the Religious Right threatens to destroy the America we love. It also threatens to generate a popular revulsion against God and religion by identifying with militarism, ecological irresponsibility, fundamentalist antagonism toward science, and insensitivity to the needs of the poor and powerless."

Lerner quotes George Grant, Executive Director of Coral Ridge Ministries, one of the huge right-wing operations:

> Christians have an objective, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ, to have dominion in civil structures just as in every other

> aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion we are after, not just a voice. It is dominion we are after, not just influence. Not equal time, dominion. . . . world conquest. . . . Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land.

On the other side of it, who will ever forget the pathetic moment during the last presidential campaign when candidate Howard Dean woke up to what was happening and tried to get on the religion bandwagon? He told a reporter that he was an Episcopalian but added that he doesn't go to church much but helped his parish with some real estate negotiations regarding a bike path. The reporter asked him what his favorite New Testament book was and Dean announced the book of Job, Old Testament.

The challenge here is for the church to remember what it is about. It is not about a partisan political agenda. It is about issues that were central to its Lord's teaching. It is not about dominion or conquest. It is about justice and compassion and kindness. It is not about taking over anything. It is about walking humbly and making sure the poor are cared for, the excluded included, the children nurtured.

The challenge is for the church to remember that it is not about itself. It is not about religion. It is about Jesus Christ.

And there is personal challenge here. This story makes me uncomfortable precisely because Jesus seems so unmanageable, so unreasonable, so unpredictable.

The scene in the temple when he upsets the tables and drives out the money changers was made for Rembrandt and Rembrandt painted it. It's an incredibly strong painting, full of chaos and turbulence. It's very crowded: a table is hitting the floor, dogs are barking, people are thrown down off their seats and are running away. In the upper right corner, the religious leaders are observing in splendid isolation, clearly deciding that this is too much; this man is too much. He must go. And in the center, a striking, strong Christ swinging the whip—not slender, frail, retiring, pious, but bulky, muscular, compelling (see Fleming Rutledge, p. 55).

It makes me uncomfortable because it is a reminder that Jesus Christ is not passive, is not content to be retiring, waiting patiently for you and me to get around to paying attention. It is a reminder that sometimes he barges into my life and yours and forces a decision. It is a reminder, on the third Sunday of Lent, that he was crucified not for teaching about love and forgiveness but because he challenged people, challenged religious and political leaders, because one day he overturned tables in the temple to show them what religion is not.

I have kept for years something Dorothy Sayers wrote a generation ago:

> The people who hanged Christ never accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to succeeding generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. . . . a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, humble; but he insulted clergymen . . . ; referred to King Herod as "that fox"; went to parties in disreputable company . . . ; assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the temple. . . . Officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (*The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*)

And so he comes to startle us, to challenge us, to awaken us to true life. So he comes and makes detached neutrality impossible. He comes to you and me and forces us to decide whether or not to be his follower, his man, his woman.

So he comes to the sanctuary of your heart and mine and invites us to make the most important decision you and I can ever make—to follow him, to live for him, forever.

Amen.